

Violence in Collaboration

It started last year when Vito wanted to do a project with Storefront. Since we were interested in showing Steven's work, Shirin quickly put the two together for a collaborative project.

From the beginning, we were all interested in using the whole space of Storefront. There has been many installations in this space, both interior and exterior, and we wanted this be the first one to transform all of Storefront. And rather than doing an installation within the space, we wanted the space itself be the installation.

Instead of the work evaporating at the expense of the next exhibition, we thought why not let it persist for the next work to respond or alter it. The idea of it becoming interactive with other works amplifies the function of this place as a forum. I know that this project, when constructed, would greatly influence the way the others would exhibit their work, and some, I hope, would violate it.

But the final budget eventually reduced our scope to the facade. Although Vito and Steven may differ, the facade of Storefront has always been the right place for me. Its crumbling condition proved adaptive to many interventions, like the stenciling of "STOREFRONT." Done by John Fekner in 1987, this matter of fact and boldly proportioned sign was a one person political vernacularism in this anrachistic urbanity. It should not be confused with the obsessional nudity of explicit capitalism, the populace phenomena of "urban strip" that contrives the contemporary urban and social struggle. So while the rest of city was condo-ing and coop-ing to cultivate "conspicuous affluence," the facade of Storefront remained dull and decrepit, adorned only with a super graffiti that read its populace ideal.

Next came the bathrooms. James Keyden Cathcart, Frank Fantauzzi and Terrence Van Elslander inserted five portable toilets into the facade, which were open for public use. The gallery became the toilets, and this produced some interesting result. While the general public functionally visited this "new gallery," our own culturally steeped audience continued to enter the "old gallery" looking for an exhibition. With only the back of toilet inside, they saw the tail of project and not the body.

Thus the privacy and privilege attached to proper art appreciation were upended. The appreication, even comprehension, of this installation was decisively public as the "art lovers and makers" continued their theatrical search for object. Here art is a physical experience, shall we say in a most primal form, and not singularly visual. It also ridicules the inability of public art to embrace functionality, which I believe is its major flaw in pursuit of social acceptances. The idea of art as a visual experience was exchanged with

art as an act of physical experience, and the public became the victorious appreciator of this exhibition that upheld a social functionality. Storefront became a space for public function in a most non-artistic, non-architectural and non-paternalistic style, and as these toilets illustrated the defense of our urban infrastructures, the degenerate facade of Storefront was the perfect backdrop to recite the importance of cultural infrastructure. The toilet, a commode of our primal sustenance, was the metaphor of the draining of our civility within the cities built for the submissive consumption of meaningless values. The toilets also besets the lack of functionality in public arts.

Then came the installation of "Formworks and Blackouts" by Mark West. Forming concrete in flexible fabrics, West's installation searched for organic manifestation of this often brutally applied material. Due to its association to Brutalism and Rationalism, concrete, with few exceptions in large spanned structural engineering and Art Nouveau works, is convicted of the hardening of built environment.

Through a series of holes made on the facade, concrete was poured into sacs of fabrics attached outside. The result was very ameobic looking members that crept out into the side walk, and this generated some wonders from the passing pedestrians and cars. Their curvaceous shape made everyone to touch, and so carrassing the ways people handle them you begin to think of how to make our environment more tactile. Visual experience still dominates the built environment, and rarely do we think of creating tatile environment where architecture can be touched as much as looked at. Textures, patterns and materials are still selected by our visual appetite, and for the remergence of the tactility appears impossible untile all artists and architects suddenly became blind.

The past of this facade is a prerequisite to understand this project that has removed it. Sure there were many who opposed this project. Some supported the anonymiety of the old facade, and others certainly had nostalgic feeling toward how it let us to abuse it. Some felt the newness brought by this project is in opposition to Storefront's rather humble character, and the new facade would be too hard to cut, open and patch like we used to.

Although the old facade has served us well, time has arrived for change. There is no reason why this new facade would not create a participatory history of its own. The resistance to the facade changing is identical people fearing Storefront itself changing. People often say how much they like us the way we are, and that usually meant stay small and grass root. This rhetoric of "we like you to stay small" is like telling children to never grow so we can forever adore them. Storefront is now old enough to grow into a size proportion to the age, will and potential. The notion of staying same is contrary to experiment, and one must always look for new and another things.

So the new facade projects a new era. Sure the organization has keyed on presenting marginal ideas and works. But if the recent worldly changes means anything, its about the change in the meaning of the margin. The erosion of dominant voids oppostions, like the punctuation of Cold bringing the irrelevance of confrontations. New ideas, individuals and institutions are rising, and cultural forums should take notice of this change. The new position for alternative is to redefine and to occupy the center.

This project is the first by Storefront to manifests an idea. In the past the organization had only the means of discourses, and only works in development or in progress were exhibited, all in the form of representation. With these theoretical works so distantly ahead of their manifestation, the time that separates their conception from their construction is the flaw. Theoretical works, when left to their natural pattern of comprehension and acceptance, loses the timeliness of their ideas and, therefore, historic the moment they become a reality. For reality to benefit from ideas that are emerging, the contraction of the time between their conception and realization is the requirement

The nature of this project is precisely that. Sure exhibitions of ideas, in the form of representation, would continue at Storefront. But why try to build some of them to exhibit. The project is an experiment in built form and not in paper. The notion here is that experiment in art and architecture is not exclusive on paper, and that exploration of theoretical nature can happen in the act of building too. The separation that exist between theory and building is a major infraction in the discourse of aesthetic, and frankly what really differentiate theory and practice is only what is built and yet built.

Throughout its history, Storefront has made a distinction of different order; works that evolve without the intention or requirement for realization, and those with conception and intention toward reality. Favoring the latter, we percieved theoretical works to be an expriment with reality before its application.

In the effort of removing the stigma of unbuildability of theoretical works, this project is the begining of a new program at Storefront. Every two years Storefront would invite and commission artist(s), architect(s) or in combination, for an experimental building project.

This championing of reality has a purpose. The impact of built environment upon the civility of our social behavior is critical for the contemporary urbanity. City as ground zero of social fragmentation and violence, its implosion devastates the fabric of community. When cities are under siege, theories on paper seem meaningless and hopeless. Small it may be, in relation to the above, the space of Storefront is now an increment to the

urbanity of public, and by building it recovers the accessibility of art to the public. This project is out of gallery and into the city.

It is also about contemporary state of public and private spaces, and their ambiguity which governs our social and urban spaces. For the spaces reputed as public, such as parks, corporate plazas and new riversides, security and surveillance has become the rules of their sustenance. And in places like Tompkins Square Park and Battery City Promenade, the space of public and private are territorially waged and ambiguous. Racial identity and economic status are the ingredients of exclusion and inclusion, and while public space are still open and expansive, overlaid are the invisible boundaries and definition of the private that control the public.

On the other hand, private spaces are becoming public spectacles. Spaces of housing projects, their open spaces and corridors, are the markets of underground commerce. Stray bullets are the marks of how these private spaces have become public. The talk shows like Winfrey and Donough channels the intimacy of life for open and public consumption. As the violence half tones the gloss of our cities, windows, doors and walls become smaller and thicker. And for architecture, the reduction of fenestration affirms Virilio's interpretation of it as a form of defense, and the material is no longer for decoration but a brutality that is indicative of our spatial violence.

The irony of the last decade is the simultaneous occurrence of the private development of public spaces and private spaces that became public territory. The differences that were once critical for the definition of both private and public have become invisible and amorphous. This phenomenon is a thorn that stings architecture which structures space by the means of definitions, and its traditional strategy of making distinction between open and enclosed space is in question. Space now is private and public simultaneously, and open and closed at the same time.

This project modifies Storefront's own definition of what is inside and outside, private and public as it is completely open yet fully closed. Made of oversized pivoting doors, linked by smaller openings that vertically rotate into tables and chairs, the new facade empties the interior space out into the sidewalk. Space once enclosed now has no definition, and is inextricably tied to the space that was once invisible and disconnected from the inside. The long and triangular space that earmarks Storefront is now subdivided into five parts, rotational to the degrees commanded by four large horizontally pivoting doors. Hardly discernable of being doors or walls, these pivoting elements donate inside spaces generously to outside, and yet steal the outside to inside. When completely open, the space that was once exclusive becomes entirely public, and when enclosed, the facade is like a fortress to safely keep the private - the use of concrete panels for exterior skin was intentional to amplify impenetrability. The result is the space that became a barrier and

the wall that became a space, walls that became doors, and doors that became walls, private that becomes public and public that becomes private.

Over the years Storefront promoted public duty of art and architecture, but this time it itself becomes public. There will be no drawings or models in exhibit, but instead just an open and empty space for all to enter. You need not be an artist, architect, or their appreciator to enter this that is simply empty to occupy and contemplate. Physicality it is neither art nor architecture, but rather something of their hybrid. It makes no explicit political or environmental statement, and definitely lacks any stylistic motives. Its quiet neutral and undiscernable, and therefore more relevant.

The neutrality of its form is a reflection of this collaboration that deduced originality of individuality. Being neither all Acconci or all Holl, this project in many ways subdued their authority. Although the result may disappoint those who expects the cumulative effect from collaborations, I am intrigued by their cancellation that undermines the disciplines' persistent notion for master creator. Art and architecture, disciplines that abides the principle of originality, should now accept teamwork as the reality of world that calls for multidisciplinary actions. Collaboration, although its real purpose unknown, nevertheless is a positive step for the de-mythification of this master builder syndrome.

Collaboration between artists and architects has been going on for sometime now, and its ironic that happens to be first for Storefront. The irony further as this Storefront happens to be for art and architecture. In someways I resented the idea of pitting two people and demand one thing from them. Instead, Storefront, always and quietly, preferred a forum of artists and architects whose work that seemed common in goals, and by presenting their work without differentiation the collaboration at Storefront was disciplinary than individually based. Besides, the collaboration shouldn't be limited to just between artists and architects, but more multi-disciplinary as is in our Eco-Tec International Forums..

Unfortunately it is the product rather the discourse that identifies collaborations. In fact it would be wonderful if the collaboration ask only for their dialogue and expected nothing at the end. I suppose that this argument would be make its sponsorship null since no is yet willing to support discourse alone.

But somehow you begin to feel that this arrangement for the product at the end riggs all collaboration. Its this product at the end that makes everyone to compromise and eat up all their artistic and temperamental edges. Without a product a collaobration is a total failure. With a product a collaboration is a complete success. No matter how bad things get during collaboration, and how you hate the way your counterpart think, do, eat and even wears, you

still have to finish it and that's that. The product at the end can save it all, and tells the outside that you have successfully collaborated. The product at the end makes all project that began as collaboration a collaboration. There is no way out of this deal. You are trapped in a game that's rigged and is fail proof.

Psychology in collaboration is numbing and egos do fly as if they have wings. The collaborators in this project aren't exactly the beginners in their fields, and that makes even more interesting in the territoriality of expertise. Working in slight fear, perhaps with suspicions and pride, and certainly reputations to tender, each's insecurity toward the other's expertise enforces them to be more innocent than the usual. On the other hand, each begins to frown the other's lack of sensibility to certain language of their own fields, and soon the defense, difference and superiority of their own discipline comes to play. Disciplinary dominancy becomes a focal vehicle, values and justifications are exchanged, including suggestions on aesthetic hierarchy of each disciplines. It is a sweaty affair, and shows severity in the specialization of human knowledge.

There was lots of hit and misses in this so called collaboration. One would propose something, and the other would modify, and that became the most recent proposal, for a moment. The cycles went on and like a battle for the last word often one proposal got a hollowed out response and so often their communication was like a void. You at times wonder about the feasibility of aesthetics ever be independent of humanism, and I guess you have to give another credit to the meaning of art as a form of human expression.

Trenches are dugged, and aesthetics becomes offensive and defensive. I like this. It takes away certain amount of complacency in art and architecture, the manicured operation of aesthetics in economic and political acceptabilities. The fisting of aesthetic may pull down some myths and presumptions about their role and functions. Independency, along with uniqueness, that has long been a heritage since the officialization of art and architecture needs some spanking. Multi-disciplinarity will be hard for the disciplinary purists. The violence in collaboration may in the end be good for the disciplines.

Kyong Park